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ABSTRACT

The "Wooster Review," a national literary magazine staffed by undergraduates, began in 1983 as an experiment in student publishing. A naturally formed interpretive community emerged as the "Review" developed: as students read, they noticed weaknesses or thought of other options the writer could have chosen; as they discussed, they began to argue their different readings and reveal widely different tastes and interpretations. Conscious of their own struggles with writing poetry and fiction, the student-editors, without direction or intervention, developed an interpretive community very much like that outlined by Stanley Fish in "Is There a Text in This Class?" The editorial decision-making process followed a pattern: (1) opening evaluations (a survey of opinions), (2) a move toward consensus, (3) reevaluation, and (4) decision (reached by the group, either by consensus or by vote). What was at stake in the decision-making process was not only an evaluation of a manuscript, but also the group's own sense of authority. The conflict between differing interpretations caused students to reconsider, to reevaluate their own readings, and introduced a sense of tentativeness into the acts of reading and interpreting on an individual level and in the group's sense of itself as a collective editor. (A partial transcript from a "Wooster Review" meeting is included.) (AEW)

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"Fishing" on The Wooster Review: A Look at a Student Interpretive Community

Michael S. Allen

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"Fishing" on The Wooster Review:

A Look at a Student Interpretive Community

Michael S. Allen

The Wooster Review began in 1983 as an experiment in student publishing. At the time I proposed the idea, it seemed original and chancey; and even today I do not know of another literary magazine like it: a national literary magazine, open to submissions from anywhere, by anyone, but having a staff almost entirely composed of undergraduates--students who, primarily on their own, read submitted manuscripts and decide what will and what will not be published.

Of course, this proposal was received somewhat skeptically and I myself had some doubts. I knew that graduate students often helped on literary magazines such as Iowa Review and Indiana Review, but I was proposing a national literary magazine where freshmen and sophomores would be reading manuscripts. Was this fair to them or to the writers who would send us their poetry and fiction? Or would it mean that, although students would help, I would be stuck with the greatest chunk of the reading and decision making? And why put undergraduates in this position anyway? Why not wait until their literary tastes were more informed, their knowledge of literary styles and traditions more complete?

It was a chancey affair, but Wooster's Vice President for Academic Affairs, Donald Harward, liked the experimental nature of the idea and so the project was funded. And it did require a lot of work. But from the beginning I wanted to trust the experiment and to trust the students. That is, I wanted to see if a group of undergraduates--with a wide range of abilities, skills, and sophistication (and lack thereof)--could make intelligent choices as they read unsolicited manuscripts and decided which

stories and poems were acceptable for publication and which were not. By "intelligent choices" I meant not just stories and poems that I wanted to publish, but choices that were made on the basis of understood or explicitly stated criteria. Would students develop criteria on their own? Would students be able to make choices without professorial intervention? Would they have reasons for those choices, or would they be made out of whim?

In the back of my mind was Stanley Fish's idea of "interpretive communities"--an idea that I found intuitively appealing but which I had, to be honest, not researched thoroughly. As I understood the part of Is There a Text In This Class? that I had read, Fish had proposed a model of reading in which interpretation, or the reader's making sense of the text, did not happen after a reader read the text, but while the reader read the text. I remember being attracted to Fish's ideas not so much for what they said, as for the radical essence of the ideas and the playfulness--indeed, the breeziness--with which he said them. One thing, however, was certain to me: Fish's ideas provided an opening for students engaging in less structured reading and interpreting activities. If the objectivity of the text was in question, then the subjective experience of each student mattered more. My general idea was that a national literary magazine with a student staff seemed as good a place as any to see if some or all of Fish's ideas had merit, and perhaps a better place than a more controlled classroom. On the magazine, students would join willingly, and they would read, interpret, respond and argue over their readings and decisions not because they had to, for a grade, but because the reading, interpreting, responding and arguing mattered to them naturally, being readers and writers themselves.

In short, I came to Stanley Fish not as a literary critic but as a writing teacher with several years of reading the research and theory in composition. Like many writing teachers, I had become interested in new ways to encourage students to see writing as a process and revision as a standard feature of that process. Fish's attention to the process or "the shape of reading" (168) was an obvious parallel to the composing strategies and options involved in attending to the "shape" of writing. I was used to talking about writing and revision, which I did freely and often with the students that began coming to Wooster Review meetings. I felt no need to make a conscious effort to articulate Fish's idea of interpretive communities to the Review staff as a whole, and only after a year or two, when one of the editors became interested in Stanley Fish, did I discuss the concept at length. (The editor, by the way, is now a graduate student at Duke, where Fish teaches.) What emerged as The Wooster Review developed was a naturally formed interpretive community: students read manuscripts, responded to them in written comments on the back of the manuscript envelope, then met to discuss them one night a week. As students read, they noticed weaknesses, or thought of other options the writer could have chosen; as they discussed, they began to argue their different readings and reveal widely different tastes and interpretations. In retrospect, it seems that student writers (who form the core of the Review) are ideally suited to understand intuitively what Fish had proposed as a model for all readers: "I want to emphasize the doubts and struggles, to argue that they are ours as well as the poe " (175). Conscious of their own doubts and struggles with writing poetry and fiction, the students on The Wooster Review, without direction or intervention, developed an interpretive community very much like that outlined by Stanley Fish.

I want to stress how this was not by intention or design on my part. At the time I started The Wooster Review, it did not matter to me how close or far away from Fish's ideas I was; I did not want to prove or disprove Fish's model. I did want to provide as open a structure as I could, so that student writers, especially, would feel free to relax and enjoy themselves: speak freely, tell jokes, play and pun with language and find a home for their natural interest in language and literature. I wanted students to gain experience reading and evaluating manuscripts, and I hoped that by working with each other as a group of readers, the student writers would learn to trust each other enough to ask for help with their own writing. I figured that if I talked about "interpretive communities" with the staff, I would make them too conscious of their actions, their readings, responses and disagreements. (They have demonstrated that they are highly conscious as it is.) I did not want to influence or prejudice them, but wanted the magazine to develop with as little editorial direction as I could tolerate without embarrassing myself, the staff, or the college.

The parameters for the magazine were, therefore, wide. There was one area of self-imposed censorship. Because the Review sponsors a creative writing contest for Ohio high schools, the magazine would not publish stories or poems with overtly sexual material. To my surprise, the students did not mind the restriction. What bothered them more was the freedom beyond the restriction to decide what was "literature" and what wasn't. This especially bothered the poets, who had a tendency to ask me for advice on every submission. So much of their education had been passive, as teachers and professors had defined "poetry" for them. A breakthrough occurred, however, when one talented student stopped trying to speak literary criticism and realized that the Review was, in his words, for "shop talk." His re-definition changed the feeling on the staff. They were ready to go.

A look at part of a transcript from a Review meeting shows how the staff functions as an interpretive community. The excerpt focuses on the final stages of the decision making process. The manuscript under consideration, "The Desert Notebook" by Warren Carrier, is by a published, respected author whom none of the students had heard of before they read the manuscript. The students are Gordon and Marjorie, the fiction co-editors, Stuart, Liz, Ken, Cass and Perri--a majority of the fiction board. The "back burner" referred to in the first line is the students' name for those submissions that have been considered once before and were found to be too good to reject upon first reading (the Review receives about 100 stories per issue and only publishes 6). I chose this excerpt because of the conflict it shows between members of the staff, how the staff negotiates its way to a final decision, and the economy of the discussion. Unlike other portions of the transcript from this meeting, here there are few digressions. After the opening banter about Liz's sweater smelling like a dead camel, there are few instances of digression into verbal play, puns, put-downs and other remarks that make this interpretive community so obviously a <u>student</u> interpretive community. However, even with all the digressions in other portions of this meeting and at other meetings, there is a shape to the decision making process that corresponds with remarkable consistency to the more economical pattern here. That shape includes the following features: 1) <u>Opening evaluations</u>: a survey of opinions, often based on the comments students have written on the manuscript's envelope; 2) A move toward <u>consensus</u>: students reveal themselves to be ready to negotiate their different readings in many of the discussions; 3) <u>Re-evaluation</u>:

students are ready to revise their opinions, or to object to a building consensus; 4) Decision: students decide as a group, either by consensus or by vote, only after the manuscript has been re-evaluated and students feel comfortable with exercising their authority. In the excerpt I have chosen, these stages can be seen as follows:

1) Opening survey: Here, the students focus on the extreme positions within the group: Ken's "I hate it" and Liz's "Oh, but it's wonderful. What's wrong with you people?" Liz's outburst is characteristic of the enthusiasms for and against manuscripts that many members of the staff, at one time or another, possess. In fact, here as elsewhere, enthusiasms take over the discussion, as students often "feel their way along" rather than consciously calling on well-articulated critical evaluations. In this excerpt, one-line judgements proliferate for awhile: "It's refreshing. I was refreshed." (Gordon); "Refreshed? The guy shot himself!" (Marjorie); "This is an enlightening story. It's hopeful." (Stuart); "It was stupid." (Ken); "It was not stupid" (Liz). The verbal fireworks nearly get out of hand as Stuart, trying to lighten things up, says to Ken, "You're wearing shorts!" but Liz turns the remark to an attack: "There are stupider things in this room...." At that moment, Gordon, the editor, revises his opinion probably in the interest of staff cohesion, beginning to side with Ken and Marjorie.

2) A move to consensus: Gordon's action is typical, not necessarily of editors but of the group as a whole. It shows a movement toward something other than the disagreement and divsion that exist within the group. And the whole group is sensitive to such a change; even Liz, the most ardent supporter of the manuscript, would rather compromise ("We should give him a re-write") rather than have the

group be divided. When I observed this repeated pattern in the transcripts, I was rather surprised, since I assumed that young writers would hold on to their own readings rather than negotiate; however, the experience of being in the group is a powerful influence and no one—not even editors—wants to force a decision without as much negotiation and compromise as possible. The group murmurs general agreement to Liz's suggestion; perhaps they have understood intuitively that they have not made a series of critical evaluations but a series of emotional responses and their emotions are endangering their existence as a group. Only Marjorie has made what can be called a "critical evaluation" and that evaluation was quite weak: "The writing actually kinda gets, sort of sloppy." The students are not making a strong interpretation; in fact, they seem to tacitly acknowledge that their interpretations are tentative and open to revision. However, as Gordon and Liz move toward a consensus, Perri, one of two very talented freshmen (the other being Ken), makes her presence known—she will have none of it: "Sorry, we know more about deserts. Change it."

3) Re-evaluation: Perri's comment is inventive and startling, coming from someone who has so far been silent. She does not accept the move to consensus, and Gordon picks up on her role-playing by acting as if he is writing a letter to the author: "Sorry. I'm a geologist (Gordon was a Geology major) and I can't accept this as real ..." After some banter by Stuart and Cass about Ken (Cass suggesting "Ken can be dealt with" by pointing arrows at him from her Society of Creative Anachronism meeting), Gordon continues "writing" his request for a revision. The role-playing casts a critical light not on the manuscript but on the group's role as a collective editor.

It is another example of the students' more emotional than intellectual response to the manuscript; here, the role-playing reveals an uncertainty about the consensus they seek. By role-playing, Gordon tries to speak for the group, but the group is not buying the idea--and Gordon soon gives it up. But the urge for consensus is a fundamental part of all decision-making by the student staff. None of the students feels certain as an editor; none of them bring to the text a well-thought-out system of critical appraisal. They know that they must make the decision as a group of readers, and negotiate their way toward a decision.

4) Decision: Stuart voices a concrete objection to the slim consensus Gordon and Liz have offered for a revision: "I just didn't have any specific criticisms, though." Aware of the generally favorable initial responses to the story on the envelope, Stuart is asking for solid critical reasons for rejection or revision. Marjorie's reply is significant in that it is incomplete; she is unable to articulate a solid objection to the story: "the writing was definitely..." gives way to a meager description, not a critical evaluation: "he was talking about his suicide." It may be that Marjorie's objection (and perhaps Ken's) is to the content of the story. The staff had become sensitive to stories about suicides since teenage suicides had been in the news (in 1966) and the creative writing contest for Ohio high schools that the magazine sponsors had yielded a sizable number of poems and stories about death. Nonetheless, Liz soon reaches for the envelope and soon Gordon begins reading the comments. That the staff has not done so earlier attests to their desire to negotiate a consensus or find common ground among their differing readings. However,

> the necessity for reaching some kind of a decision outweighs the desire for consensus. The comments on the envelope reveal a solid majority praising the story: "I really like this. Its contrasting search for meaning and the experience of futility"; "I did not get lost or lose interest ... I think it's great and should be read by (the) masses"; "what he describes is the universal anarchy of emotions in light of science, on a personal level, which is beautiful." The comments, indeed, are more critical and reflective than the comments within the meeting, which were more emotional and even personal. As Gordon calls for a vote, even Marjorie seems less opposed. The manuscript is accepted.

As demonstrated by this excerpt, what is at stake in the decision-making process on The Wooster Review is not only an evaluation of a submitted manuscript, but also the group's own sense of authority. The conflict between differing interpretations causes students to reconsider, to re-evaluate their own readings, introducing a sense of tentativeness into the acts of reading and interpretation on an individual level and in the group's sense of itself as a collective editor. This tentativeness arises because of the necessity for negotiation in the face of a weighty decision that none of the students wants to make on his or her own. Students on the Review are face to face with the differing "interpretive strategies" Stanley Fish shows that each reader brings to a text. These strategies are fundamental to reading and are fundamentally personal ways readers have of "constituting (the text's) properties and assigning their intentions" (171).

In negotiating their way to a decision, students experience the tentativeness of their readings and of their identity as an interpretive community. They become aware that, as Professor Fish says, "interpretive communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned. This does not mean that there is no point at which an individual has not yet learned any. The ability to interpret is not acquired; it is constitutive of being human" (172). Because interpretation is a basic human activity, it involves "extending the scope of interpretation to include the interpreters themselves" (175). In such a way, the students' emotional outbursts and argumentativeness further demonstrate the appropriateness of Professor Fish's model of reading; lacking the "critical distance" more experienced readers acquire, the students reveal that their readings are indeed <u>theirs</u>, extensions of themselves, even as writers know that their writing is an extension of themselves. As they read, the students engage in the most basic facts of reading that Professor Fish has focused on in his model, in "assigning the intentions" that authors may have had:

> an intention... is made when perceptual closure is <u>hazarded</u>; . . . intention is known when and only when it is recognized; it is recognized as soon as you decide about it; you decide about it as soon as you make a sense and you make a sense (or so my model claims) as soon as you can. (164) (italics added)

The students on <u>The Wooster Review</u> cannot but agree with Professor Fish. Again and again, their negotiations of responses, their recourse to revision, their efforts to achieve consensus and to re-evaluate their decisions show an interpretive community trying to "make a sense" as

they recognize a writer's intentions and check their readings against the "senses" made by other readers. Repeatedly, they are made aware of the different learned interpretive strategies each of them brings to a text to "make sense" of it. Indeed, because none of the students has yet established a well-formed or well-articulated critical approach to literature or a well-informed literary taste, they can experience the tentativeness and instability of a text more readily than can more experienced and trained readers. Rather than being a limitation, as I had originally feared, this lack of experience gives the act of reading texts an immediacy that only enriches the students' response, negotiation, re-evaluation and final decision about a submitted manuscript. Without knowing it, they have been exploring the act of reading and interpreting in a way that fulfills remarkably well the model of reading made famous by Stanley Fish.

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The College of Wooster

A PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT FROM A WOOSTER REVIEW MEETING

G: Okay, let's do the back burner first since Liz hasn't had dinner yet. (discussing Liz's huge sweater)

Liz: I'm growing into it...it's winter. I get chubby. And it smells like a dead camel.

S: Well that's not good.

G: A dyke camel?

L: A dead camel.

G: I was going to say.

S: How would you know?

L: Have you smelled a dead camel lately?

G: They don't ask me.

L: Bad humour.

S: The Bad Humour Man. Ding Ding "Go away kids! No ice cream! Eat liver. It's good for you.

G: (getting back to business despite us) Oh this is the one I like and you guys hate.

M: You don't like it?

G: I was going to say that the comments over there were good enough to publish.

M: Ken doesn't like it.

> K: I hate it.

L&M: What is it?

G: Ken doesn't like it but this is Desert Notebook, where the guy goes...

> L: Oh, but it's wonderful, what's wrong with you people?

G. ...goes to his friend's grave all the time.

L: I think it's great.

S: Well tough noogies.

G: I'm sorry that you don't find any Joyce in every page.

M: Well, it's interesting but is it really that great? I mean just because it...

G: It's refreshing. I was refreshed.

M: Refreshed? If the guy shot himself on the grave.

S: Listen, not every death story is depressing...

G: This isn't a depressing death story.

S: This is an enlightening story. It's hopeful.

G: He has this disease and so he takes care of it in a novel way. I mean he's going to die of AIDS in three days so he wants to kill himself off in an honorable way.

L: He wants to go die in the desert.

G: Yes. He wants to spread his ashes, so to speak, over nature instead of going to a second rate cemetery.

L: Okay, there's...

G: His friend goes back every year, hazards the Death Valley to hike to his grave all the time.

K: It was stupid.

L: It was <u>not</u> stupid.

K: It was stupid. I'm sorry.

M: I think the writing actually kinda gets, sort of sloppy.

S: (looking at Ken) You're wearing shorts! (it was cold outside)

L: Ther're stupider things in this room than...

> G: Maybe it's not enough of a desert notebook. He doesn't notice the lizards, he doesn't notice the different kinds of... he doesn't notice the life amidst the death.

L: Yeah he does, because life goes up there but it doesn't come back.

G: Yeah, but there is an abundance of life in the desert and he doesn't notice it. And it says <u>Desert Notebook</u> so you'd think of...

> L: I think we should give him a re-write. (General agreement)

>Perri: Sorry, we know more about deserts. Change it.

G: Sorry, I'm a geologist and I can't accept this as real but we would like to publish it if you would re-write it.

S: Except for Ken. Ken would never want to publish...

Cass: (points arrows at Ken) Ken can be dealt with. (laughter)

G: We have one guy here who hates it, but don't let that bother you. Okay, who wants to write him a letter? The editor? Okay, I'll write him a letter.

M: Well, you seem really up on it.

G: You're right, I am.

> S: I just didn't have any specific criticisms, though.

M: I just thought the writing was definitely... he was talking about his suicide...

G: Do we really want a re-write from this guy?

L: No, we really want to publish it.

G: Do we really want to publish it? I mean...Why...

L: The problem with a re-write is that we really don't have anything to say.

G: What are the redeeming qualities of this piece?

L: I don't know, it was about two months ago that I read it but it says here that he (reading from the envelope) "describes the universal anarchy in emotions, in light of science, on a personal level, (which is great)"

S: You wrote that comment didn't you?

L: Yeah.

> G: Let's read these comments. We'll get a little idea.

S: Oh God.

> G: "I really like this. It's contrasting search for meaning and the experience of futility. Depressing. Unexpectedly worthwhile after the sort of artsy opening of a journal."..."I disagree. This writer seems overwhelmed by his own supposed profundity. Not very interesting at all and far too simplistic in its psychology"..."Most anyone reading this is bound to get lost and lose interest. I also think that the climax wasn't enough."..."I did not get lost or lose interest. This guy sounds intelligent. A rarity. I thought it was pretty good, interesting ideas and everything. I think it's great and it should be read by masses." The masses. Not Catholic services. "Because what he describes is the universal anarchy of emotions, in light of science, on a personal level which is beautiful. Yes."..."Yes. I was going to say that the comments over there were good enough to publish, but I now see that the order inside is better." So do we want a re-write or do we want to publish it as is?

L: I would like to publish as is.

G: You would like to publish as is?

L: Yes.

S: Because I think the idea of a desert notebook is sort of a lead in to...

G: Asking him for a re-write is such a bitch of a process.

L: We wouldn't have anything to ask him to re-write.

S: I think the idea of it being not note-booky enough...note-booky enough... (general laughter)...the opening is a lot like a notebook, and then as it goes on it's supposed to be less and less of it and more in his mind.

G: It's a story.

S: Yeah.

L: Yeah.

G: Called The Desert Notebook.

S: It starts out as a notebook, but...

G: You don't want it to be...

S: ...but then it gets past that.

G: ...a scientific notebook, you want it to be a story.

S: No, you want it to be a scientific notebook.

G: No, I don't...

S: You have these repressed desires to read Geo all the time.

G: With the exception of Ken, I think we unamimously...well, Margie would sort of like to send it back, right?.

M: Huh?

G: Would you like to accept it as is? All those in favor of accepting as is, Mike, we'll record the numbers so you don't have to see this, uh, please raise their hand. That is five of seven. That is majority for the party here. I think we're going to accept this as is.